

## The Assessment Phase

Districting is a complex process. In this book we will discuss the different phases in the districting process. The first one is the assessment phase. This is when you informally assess your local needs for public library service and then use that information to determine if creating a new library district will meet those needs.

You also need to consider if districting is right for you and your

community. Creating a new library district is time consuming and difficult. Ask yourselves if you are willing to put in the time and effort involved in the process. Remember that at any time during this districting process, you can call on the State Library for help.

At the end of this assessment phase, ask yourselves the following question: Is creating a library district something we want to pur-

sue? If your local situation makes a successful districting effort unlikely, or if you are not ready to put in the effort needed to create a library district, look at other alternatives for improving library services. If districting is a possibility and you are willing to do the work, then you are ready for the formal planning phase.

## Tasks of the Assessment Phase

There are ten tasks that need to be completed during the assessment phase. We've simplified the process by listing them numerically. Make sure you've addressed these ten tasks. The order in which you do them is not always important. We'll look at each one in detail later. To keep things straight, we have used an alpha/numeric code for the different tasks. We will use the first letter of phase we are in, so in this case tasks are labeled A for assessment.

A1. Determine if there is a perceived need for a library dis-

trict through informal conversations with members of the community.

A2. Form a group of supporters to plan and carry out the assessment phase.

A3. Create a written vision statement of what a library district could provide.

A4. Make a preliminary decision about what geographical area will be covered by the library district and about how the district will relate to any existing public library entities within or near this area.

A5. Assess the potential costs for the district.

A6. Make formal presentations about library districting to community organizations.

A7. Identify and contact potential supporters of the library district idea.

A8. Identify potential opponents of the library district idea.

A9. Give a formal committee the task of pursuing the library district process.

## Task A One: Conversations about Library Services.

Library districting efforts are about improving current public library service. In some cases, public library service is non-existent, because there is no public library that is easily accessible. In other cases, libraries must charge an annual use fee for certain patrons who do not live in the county. And sometimes libraries do not have the tax

base they need to provide adequate library service. In any of these examples, library districts may help. A districting effort that consolidates two or more libraries can often create better library service by eliminating duplication of services and creating economies of scale.

You and others in the community may feel the need to improve library service, but you should assess public interest. You might think of public library service as a public good, but others in the community may not feel this way. This is particularly true when tax dollars are involved.

## Task A One: Conversations about Library Services. (continued)

Informal conversations about improving library service should become more deliberate. Talk about library service with your friends or in the groups to which you belong. Do other people join in the conversation, or is the subject quickly changed? Typically if there is a perceived need, informal contacts will lead to the telling of “horror stories” about the lack of access to library service or about inadequate service. These people will often volunteer to help you.

From the beginning, all libraries and government officials within the proposed district area should be kept informed about the assessment process. This includes library boards, library staff, city councils and/or county commissioners. Objections or even indifference from any of these groups could be fatal to the districting process. If at all possible, encourage these people (particularly board members) to take a leading role in the districting efforts.

Find out about the history of library services in your area. If there is no library now, was there ever a library? If so, why did it close? If there is a library, is there anything in its history that would indicate problems for a districting effort? Is there any history of antagonism among libraries in the area?

## Task A Two: Forming a Group.

You need a group of people, rather than an individual, to assess the viability of districting. A library board should be involved in this group, but other members in the community like local leaders, business people, school officials, etc. must be involved.

This group will do most of the work of the Assessment Phase. They should create a plan and time line for carrying out this part of the project. The plan doesn't have to be detailed; it simply needs to list the tasks to be done and an approximate time by which tasks should be

completed. At the end of this section, we have included an Assessment Phase checklist. You can use this checklist as is or modify it to meet your needs.

## Task A Three: Creating a Vision.

The group needs to create a vision statement for the proposed library district. As you move further into the assessment phase, you must go beyond the general idea of improving library services. It is vital that you develop a specific vision of what good public library service looks like for your community. Your vision depends upon your community. In some communities the vision will emphasize children; in others it may be retired adults. When you develop a vision for the library district, you must consider your community. If you are not developing a vision in tune with the

needs of your community, you will not be successful in your efforts.

How can you begin to develop a vision of what a library district might mean for your community? Visit libraries in similar communities and talk to librarians and board members. These visits will make you aware of what is possible in similar situations.

Contact the Montana State Library to find out future plans for libraries across the state or even the nation. This wider vision may help your districting effort.

Access to information is increasingly important in our society. People who are not being served by public libraries will be left behind educationally and economically. It is important that communities make decisions about library services from this perspective.

Holding public meetings can help identify a vision as well. You can ask people to identify what kinds of services they would like to have from a new library district. Try this exercise. Ask people to brainstorm what library services they would like to have within the next ten

## Task A Three: Creating a Vision (continued).

years. Services can be prioritized and the vision statement written on the priorities of the community. Attendance at public meetings is sporadic, so be sure and use a variety of ways to find out what the community needs.

When you have collected the information you need, write a vision statement. Use general terms and do not promise particular services. Here are some examples of vision statements that other districts have used:

- Children in our community will have easy access to information they need for their education and recreational activities.
- The library will promote life-long reading habits.
- Adults will have access to information that will help them in their home and business enterprises.

- Through the library district, our community members will access information from around the world.

The statement may then include potential services, stated as possibilities. For example:

- To reach people throughout the service area, the district library may use bookmobiles or books-by-mail.
- The district library may contain materials in a variety of formats, e.g. print, video, and computer accessible information.
- The library may serve as a gateway to electronic networks.

Your vision statement can focus on the expansion of existing library services or the offering of new services.

Use clear and concise language, when writing your vision statement.

It should fit on a single sheet of paper and should be no more than a few paragraphs long. This statement should be used frequently throughout the districting project. Make it positive and highly readable. Reproduce the vision statement on high quality paper and make it graphically attractive. This statement will be one of the most important ways in which library district supporters will show their enthusiasm for creating a district.

Distributing the vision statement will probably be the first truly “public” act of the group that is leading the districting effort. The library board(s) should officially adopt the statement. It should then be sent to the local paper along with a story about the assessment process that the group is conducting. The story should include a way of contacting the group for comments.

## Task A Four: Preliminary Districting Decisions.

Now you should begin making preliminary decisions about what the proposed library district will look like. *Assessment Phase Form D: Geographical/Social Analysis* at the end of this section will help you gather data about the area.

Look at every possible option for providing service for your community. In general larger districts can provide better library services, since they have a stronger financial base and there will be less duplication of services. For communities located far from an existing library, it might be possible for a district to

provide better service through a branch, bookmobile, or books-by-mail program.

Montana Code Annotated 22-1-701 states that the territory within a new library district must contain a taxable value of at least \$5 million. Check to see if your proposed district meets this requirement.

The county clerk can usually give the group information about the assessed value of a proposed district. If the proposed district doesn't meet this requirement explore other options, such as increasing the boundaries or asking an exist-

ing library to join you.

If the proposed district surrounds or is contiguous to other public libraries' service area, confer with those library boards. At this point boards may not be willing to commit to major changes in their operations, but they may be willing to examine possible options in working with a new district. Once they have decided that a new district may benefit them, the library board may be willing to take a leading role in the project.

When planning your district boundaries, look at social and

## Task A Four: Preliminary Districting Decisions (continued).

geographical patterns that might affect the new district. Mapping can help you in this process. Begin with a high quality map of the county or counties involved. Mark cities, schools, libraries, and library branches on the map.

Figure out the patterns of travel within and outside of the potential district by using topographical and road maps. Look at the natural barriers in your area — geographical features such as mountains and rivers. What places are easy to get to; what places are more difficult to reach? Are some parts of the potential district connected to areas outside the district?

Work with your county and/or city clerk to discover the boundaries of other districts, such as weed, mosquito, school, fire, etc. The counties and the Department of Revenue like new districts to follow these established districts' lines. It is best to work with local government officials when determining logical boundaries. However, remember to consider library service needs. Sometimes existing district lines do not make sense when it comes to providing quality library services.

Begin evaluating the various alternatives, once you have finished mapping the potential district area.

Once you have gathered and analyzed this information, think about what it will mean for a districting project. Different social and economic patterns may make one form of districting project preferable to another. Look at the various options open to you. There are six alternatives for creating a public

library district. Each of these has advantages and disadvantages.

a) Establishment. Territory that contains no library can be formed into a library district. The new district can set up its own library and provide services itself. Advantage to this method is that the new district has a great deal of control over the service it will provide. Disadvantages are that setting up a new library takes a tremendous amount of work. If there are other libraries in the area, there may be difficulties working out reciprocal arrangements.

b) Establishment/Contract Service. Territory that contains no library can be formed into a library district, but the new district does not provide services itself. Instead it contracts with an existing library to provide services to its residents. Advantage of this system is that the new district does not have to set up its own library. Disadvantages are that the district must negotiate a contract with a library that does provide services. This gives it less control and at times there may be major conflicts between the district and the contracting library.

c) Establishment/Existing Library. Territory that includes one existing city or county library can be formed into a district that serves the city or county and surrounding area. Advantages of this option are that the district does not have to set up a new library, and the district controls the services. Disadvantages in the city

library scenario are that "rural" residents may feel that the city controls all of the services and that the district is a way of making rural residents pay for city services. This would not necessarily be true in the case of a county library becoming a district, since all residents pay county taxes.

d) Establishment/City Library Combination. Territory that includes two or more city libraries can be formed into a district that includes untaxed territory that connects the cities together. Advantages of this option are that the district does not have to set up a new library, and the district controls the services. Disadvantages are that much work will be required to coordinate the services between the branches and to assure that the different communities feel that they are treated fairly.

e) Establishment/County Library Combination. Territory that includes two or more county libraries can be formed into a district. Advantages of this option are that the district does not have to set up a new library, and the district controls the services. Disadvantages are that the two counties must work through their different government structures and find common ground to negotiate a district. Much work will be required to coordinate services and to assure that the different communities feel that they are treated fairly.

## Task A Four: Preliminary Districting Decisions (continued).

f) Establishment/County-City Library Combination. Territory that includes one or more county libraries and one or more city libraries can be formed into a district. Advantages of this option are that the district does not have to set up a new library, and the district controls the services. Disadvantages are that the county and city must work through their different government structures

and find common ground to negotiate a district. Much work will be required to coordinate services and to assure that the different communities feel that they are treated fairly.

Working in stages. There may be political or legal advantages to working through a district creation. Examine alternative methods of achieving the same objective during the assessment stage.

Examine all possibilities. Any possibility that meets the requirements of Montana law should be considered. [See MCA 22-1-701 through 22-1-711 in *Addendum A*.] Assess the advantages and disadvantages of each option. [*Assessment Phase Form E: Districting Option Assessment* at the end of this section can help.] The result of task four should be a preliminary description of a possible district.

## Task A Five: Cost Assessments.

You can't give an accurate estimate of operational costs for your area at this stage, but you should give a range of costs. State law requires that the territory included in a public library district contain a taxable value of at least \$5 million. Refer to MCA 15-10-420 for information about the maximum levy for a library district operational budget. Calculate a somewhat more accurate figure for cost by examining the statistics for libraries serving similar size populations. The State Library publishes statistics for Montana public libraries annually. Average expenditures per capita are calculated for libraries in various size categories. Multiply this per capita figure by the population being served in the proposed district to figure out what a typical district of that size spends for service. Additional costs to consider include:

- ◆ costs of an annual trustee election

- ◆ an audit
- ◆ bookkeeping
- ◆ building costs if they are assumed by the district – which includes lease or purchase, repair and maintenance, utilities, snow removal, landscape, janitorial services, etc.
- ◆ personnel administration costs including salaries, insurance and retirement, along with other benefits.

**Caution:** It is difficult to give accurate figures on the operational costs for a new district. Figures at best will be inexact, so when discussing operational costs give a range of costs rather than a specific cost. If supporters mention a specific cost, people will assume that this figure is the one that must be raised. Later on in the districting process, you will be able to provide more accurate figures to the public.

If the new district will have to purchase, build, or extensively re-

model a building in order to provide district services, the exploratory group should include these costs in the total cost estimate as capital costs. Capital costs are the costs of buying or building a library facility. These costs may be raised through bond issues or as part of a depreciation fund. [See MCA 22-1-707]. If there will be major capital costs in beginning the library district, state these costs openly and honestly in any estimate of the district's total costs. (Opponents of the districting effort will certainly include these costs in their estimates, so it's best to be open about all costs.)

The issue of costs is usually one of the most difficult aspects of promoting a new library district. Be open and aboveboard when discussing the costs of a library district and how money will be raised through property taxes, but relate the cost of library services to the value people will receive from those services.

## Task A Six: Presenting the Idea to the Community.

Begin approaching community groups, once you have identified an interest in districting and you have defined your vision. Ask to be given time at the business meetings of service clubs--such as the Kiwanis and the Rotary — as well as educational organizations — such as the school board and Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Tell these people what you have been thinking about. Present your vision, but be honest about the costs. Talk about tax-supported library service.

Try to take at least two people to each group: one to speak and one to record what is said. After the meeting, look at recorded questions and comments. Count the

ones that seem positive and the ones that seem negative. Analyze the meeting by answering the questions who said what, what was said, what wasn't said, and why was it said. This is subjective, but will add to the value of counting the number of positive versus negative comments. Based on both your objective and subjective analysis of the meeting, determine whether or not creating a library district is a possibility. [Refer to *Assessment Phase Form A: Group/Individual Meeting Analysis* at the end of this section.]

You will need to continue meeting with community groups, as you continue the assessment and planning phases. Begin with those

who are likely to be the most positive. You will build your own confidence and you will have a reality check on the prospects of success. If organizations that normally support the library are not doing so, then your chances of succeeding are not good.

If you find support where it should be, the next step is to see if there is support in less likely places. Talk to organizations that do not represent educational or community improvement interests. You will learn whether there is adequate support to proceed, and you will begin identifying supporters and opponents to the effort.

## Task A Seven: Identifying Supporters.

General Supporters. Individuals will begin to identify themselves as supporters, as you work through the Needs Assessment and Visioning task. Keep the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of these people in a file or computerized database.

Determine if you will have adequate volunteer help to carry out the effort. You will need your community's help to succeed. Ask for potential volunteers to sign up, as you meet with supportive groups. Have a sign-up sheet at the library and a sign asking for volunteers to help with the districting effort. A good number of volunteers is a sign of support in the community. If there are few people willing to sign up, there may

be inadequate community support to proceed.

Ask potential volunteers for their name, address, email address, and telephone number. You should also ask if they have specific skills that would be useful in the districting effort. Such skills might include computer skills, writing, graphic arts, public speaking, or organizational skills. [Refer to *Assessment Phase Form B: Volunteer Signup* at the end of this section.]

Opinion Leader Supporters. Seek opinion leader supporters, as well as general supporters. In general, community leaders who support other educational and governmental services will be most likely to support a districting effort. These people tend to look to the future of the

community and are generally considered to be "progressive." Contact these people individually.

Opinion leader supporters will be drawn from the following groups:

*Political leaders*, such as city council members, county commissioners, school board members, and legislators;

*Business leaders*, such as the managers of the leading companies, heads of the chambers of commerce, bankers, and leading representatives from farm, mining, ranching, or timber industry associations;

*Media leaders*, such as newspaper editors, publishers, and the station managers of local radio and television stations;

## Task A Seven: Identifying Supporters (continued).

*Educational leaders*, such as school superintendents, presidents of the local teachers' association; and prominent teachers;

*Social leaders*, such as church leaders and the heads of important community groups and service organizations. Other social leaders may not hold any official position in the community, but are generally seen as a powerful force in community life.

The spouses of these leaders may also become important opinion leader supporters in a districting effort.

Begin searching for opinion leader supporters by listing all of the important opinion leaders in your community by name. After your

group has created this list, make an initial assessment of whether or not each person is likely to support the project, oppose the project or will be neutral. [Refer to *Assessment Phase Form C: Opinion Leaders* at the end of this section.]

Contact those who you think are likely to be supportive, and then those who you feel will be neutral. Do this individually and by appointment. Explain what you are considering and ask the person whether they would be likely to support such an effort. Assure them that their comments will be kept confidential, if that seems necessary. Take notes at the meeting, if they are comfortable with the idea.

Compare notes after the meeting. If the person did not want you to

take notes, write down your impressions of the meeting as soon as possible. Make an assessment of the person's support level:

- ♦ Very Supportive: will speak for the effort and actively work for it.
- ♦ Supportive: will speak for the effort, but not work for it.
- ♦ Neutral: will not speak for or against the effort.
- ♦ Opposed: will speak against the effort.
- ♦ Very Opposed: will speak against the effort and actively work against it.

Good support from your community's opinion leaders should encourage you to continue with the effort.

## Task A Eight: Identifying Opponents.

Identify potential opponents of the districting effort as you identify supporters. When you are identifying opponents focus on those who are community opinion leaders or who represent organized groups. Community leaders who are most likely to oppose a districting effort are those who oppose taxes and tax supported services in general. They may do this out of concern about their own taxes or they may oppose taxes on principle. Other community leaders are not opposed to taxes in general, but may see a new district as a threat to other local government services they view as more vital.

Whether you should contact opinion leaders who you believe will oppose the districting effort at this point is a political decision that will depend to a large extent on what you know about the person and the community. In some cases, an opinion leader may become less opposed to a project if contacted. S/he may see the contact as a sign of respect. On the other hand if you contact opponents and you continue to work on the project, they may see that as a sign that you disregarded their opinions.

Contacting opponents may give them more time to organize against a districting effort. Keep in mind; some people that you think will op-

pose the effort may surprise you. Public libraries carry a tremendous amount of good will in a democracy. People who do not support other forms of tax-supported services often are very favorable to public libraries.

Use the same interviewing process when speaking with those who support, oppose, or are neutral. You are simply seeking information. Do not argue with those who say they are opposed to a library district, but offer to give them more information if they wish it.

The project is probably viable and you will want to proceed, if you find that the opposition to it is weak.

## Task A Nine: Recruit New Group Members.

Once you have found support and interest for a district, recruit new members who can help the original group do the work necessary to create a library district. One of the five library board members from each library involved must make a strong commitment to the project and no board members should oppose it. ***If strong support is not available from the existing library board(s), the districting project will almost certainly not work.*** Other community members should be included in the group.

It is essential that the library director and other staff support the project. Staff members often fear that districting may threaten their employment or their benefits. Be honest with the staff on these points. In some cases, districting will have little effect on the employment or working conditions of the staff. In other cases, districting may have very serious implications for staff.

It is probably too early to determine exactly how the districting effort will affect staff members, but you need to deal with the staff in good faith. State up-front that the districting project will make major changes in the conditions of their employment, if that is the case. Assure staff that their concerns will be taken into account as the districting process moves forward. Include staff representatives in the group, but ask them to be open-minded about the process.

Educate potential group members about the commitment they are making before asking them to join the group. Districting projects involve running an election and will entail a great deal of work. Because of this, group members should have a complete understanding of the process. Hold a meeting with all potential members of a group. State Library personnel can talk to the group about the districting process and the many steps that need to be taken. Have someone from another districting project talk about their experience, as they can give potential members a more accurate picture of what happens.

Ask people to make a commitment at the end of the meeting. Another sign of a successful districting project is the formation of a good group that includes some of the community's opinion leaders.

Reality Checks. The Assessment Phase is the time to determine whether a successful districting effort is possible and to make some preliminary decisions about what a district might look like. Make time for reality checks throughout the entire districting process.

Reality checks should be group activities that can be included on the agendas of regular meetings or they can be the sole purpose of a meeting. When conducting a reality

check, review the list of tasks that should have been completed. Ask whether or not the tasks have been completed and whether the information gained indicates that a districting effort is likely to be successful. Examine documentation that has been developed as part of the process.

Ask people about their own energy level and enthusiasm for the project. It is especially important to check with library board members to see about their level of commitment.

If a reality check is positive, then it will encourage the group to continue with the project. If the reality check indicates that there are problems, then it may indicate that the group needs to change direction, slow down, or that a district library is not possible under present conditions. Find this out during the Assessment Phase, before a great deal of time, energy, and money is poured into the effort. If the Assessment Phase makes it clear that a districting effort is likely to fail, discuss other options for obtaining or improving library services. These options can be explored with State Library personnel.



## Assessment Phase: Checklist

- ☐ Talked about the library in informal conversations
- ☐ Contacted the State Library
- ☐ Know the library history of our community
- ☐ Contacted all library boards within the potential district
- ☐ Formed an exploratory group
- ☐ Created a plan for the Assessment Phase
- ☐ Developed a vision statement for the library district
- ☐ Established a formal work group
- ☐ Explored districting options
- ☐ Considered the geographical and social factors that might affect the library district
- ☐ Chose tentative boundaries for the district.
- ☐ Developed a cost range for the district, including both operational and capital costs
- ☐ Presented the vision to supportive community groups
- ☐ Listed potential opinion leader supporters for the district
- ☐ Listed potential opponents of the district
- ☐ Decided whether or not to contact potential opponents of the district.

## Assessment Phase Form A: Group/Individual Meeting Analysis

Group/Individual: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Important Questions Asked by the Person(s) We Met:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Number of Positive Questions/Comments:

Number of Negative Questions/Comments:

Impressions of Meeting:

Based on this meeting, we would judge this group/individual to be:

- ☐ Very Supportive: Will speak for the effort and actively work for it.
- ☐ Supportive: Will speak for the effort, but not work for it.
- ☐ Neutral: Will not speak for or against the effort.
- ☐ Opposed: Will speak against the effort.
- ☐ Very Opposed: Will speak against the effort and actively work against it.

## Assessment Phase Form B: Volunteer Sign-Up

[illegible]

## Assessment Phase Form C: Opinion Leaders

<b>Political Leaders:</b>		
<u>Name</u>	<u>Community Position</u>	<u>Positive/Negative</u>

<b>Business Leaders:</b>		
<u>Name</u>	<u>Community Position</u>	<u>Positive/Negative</u>

<b>Educational Leaders:</b>		
<u>Name</u>	<u>Community Position</u>	<u>Positive/Negative</u>

<b>Social Leaders:</b>		
<u>Name</u>	<u>Community Position</u>	<u>Positive/Negative</u>

## Assessment Phase Form D: Geographical/Social Analysis

Option: \_\_\_\_\_ Population of proposed district: \_\_\_\_\_

Assessment valuation of the proposed district: \_\_\_\_\_

County/Counties within which the district will lie:

Largest cities in the district with their populations:

Reservations, large federal or state land areas within the district:

City Libraries in the district:

School Districts within county/counties:

Other taxing district within county/counties:

Nearest district library/libraries:

Nearest city over 25,000 population outside of the district:

Major highways in the district:

Where do most people in this district do their shopping? \_\_\_\_\_

**Assessment Phase Form E:  
Districting Option Assessment**

<b>Kind of Option (circle):</b>	<b>Establishment</b>	<b>Establishment/Combination</b>
<b>Description of Option:</b>		
<b>Advantages of Option:</b>		
<b>Disadvantages of Options:</b>		
<b>Barriers to Implementing Option:</b>		
<b>Methods by Which Barriers Can be Overcome:</b>		